

Local craftsmen are renouncing commercialism for the patient production of handmade art

By AMY McRARY
Staff Writer

Wood worker Hutch Travers makes cedar beds. But he doesn't lie in them; he sells them.

Marion Menapace makes faces. But the faces she forms are from clay and she places them on her pots and pitchers made on her potter's wheel.

Hutch and Marion are both members of the Chinaberry Craft Co-op, a four-room house located on West Rosemary Street.

Like the other Co-op members, both these people make their beds and bowls and sell them here in the tiny store, crowded with leather purses, butcher block tables and even a pet tombstone.

Each of the 14 members in the organization takes his or her turn minding the store and today is Hutch's turn. A lean young man with wire-rimmed glasses and shoulder length blond hair, he makes plant stands and wood sculptures from pine, walnut and cedar. But the crowning example of his work is the large cedar bed that sits in the front room, the smell of its wood filling the shop.

"Oh, you mean you can smell the wood?" he asks and grins. "You see, I'm really surprised when people tell me that because I can't smell cedar anymore."

"I've been working with wood since I was in high school and have been making these beds for about five years. I guess I'm immune to it. That's sad, I guess, 'cause people say it's a nice smell."

It takes 2½ to 4 weeks, 8 to 9 tree trunks and any number of branches to complete one of the cedar beds. "I work with the person who wants the bed on a design. Then I go to work, using hand tools. After I sand and shape the poles, I fit the pieces together and the bed's ready," Hutch explained.

"I guess I really just make the beds now for money. You see, I'm more into making my sculptures from wood now." He proudly displayed some pictures of



Staff photo by Joseph Thomas

In their attempts to decommercialize craftsmanship, the members of the Chinaberry Craft Coop make their own quilts, pottery, ceramics, and woodwork. It's a matter of priorities, they say — the rewards are more in the line of pride in originality than profit.

his sculptures. They range from a life-sized hand made of pine to a walnut five-foot abstract statue that, by his own description, "looks like a giant drill-bit."

After he made his beds, stands and sculptures, Hutch wanted a more dependable market than craft fairs, though the co-op members still

participate in these events. It was three years ago that he and seven other artists got together to form the co-op.

"I heard from a friend who had heard from a friend that the manager of Harmony Foods on Franklin street wanted to share his rent and form a craft shop in the basement of his store.

"So we all got together. It took us awhile to get going. But in a year we needed more space. Soon we'll have to move again. We can only take two artists with the same craft now because it's so crowded," he said, waving one large hand at the overflowing shelves.

To join the co-op, a craftsman must sign a 6-month contract, agreeing to pay a \$15 monthly fee and give 10 per cent of his or her earnings to the store. This enables the co-op to pay the bills and rent.

A young man with a ponytail enters the shop. Hutch nods hello and says, "There's a whole array of people who come here. Most of them buy — and come back." The customer has selected a dark red vase and as Hutch wraps it in newspaper, he explains the philosophy of the co-op members.

"We use only traditional tools. There's none of this buzz-buzz stuff. Take me for instance; I use only hammers and mallets for a lot of my work. I started doing this on my own because I got tired of making assembly line furniture. The work I do now is more thought and less physically straining.

"In a way, using this kind of tool is a rebellion against the assembly line; against the idea of 'turn it out as fast as you can.' Our philosophy is 'turn it out as fast as you can, but do a good job.'"

Another young man walks in, wearing blue jeans and a T-shirt. He is not another customer, but a co-op member, as Hutch greets him with "Ah, another artisan!" Steve Alford and his girlfriend Amy Hauser make the silver jewelry hanging in the case on the wall.

Steve, like Hutch and other members, began his craft as a hobby, to keep or give away to his friends.

"But," Hutch said, "it's a different feeling once you sell something. It's giving but it's making money too."

"Yeah," Steve said, "the money makes it a very gratifying feeling."

The next day Hutch is at the co-op,



Staff photo by Joseph Thomas

Handmade pottery is just one of the specialties of the Chinaberry Craft Co-op, a group of area individual craftsmen and artists who use the Rosemary street store as their workshops. Other products include a cedar bed and hand-sewn quilts.

carrying in the drill-bit statue and placing it where the sun shines on the polished wood. Another co-op member is busy unwrapping a seemingly endless assortment of her pottery pitchers, bowls and cups. A slim, older woman, Marion Menapace brushes back her short auburn hair as she sets the pots on the counter where Steve's jewelry is now

displayed. Before she became a potter, Marion worked in New York in a variety of jobs ranging from a waitress to a teacher in Harlem. "But," she said, "I always loved to cook and making a pot is really just baking at high temperatures. I became a potter by chance; my neighbor had a wheel and I tried it. I got hooked."

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